

Sociology of sexualities, Latinas and Latinos: A review of the field

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In this essay, we offer a genealogy of the limited yet gradually blossoming area of sexualities theorizing and research on US Latina and Latinos in the USA.¹

Our own personal biographies are both unique and diverse. The first author was born and raised in northern Mexico; the second author was born and raised in Puerto Rico—both migrated to the USA (she to the Southwest, he to the Northeast) in their mid-20s. We are seasoned sexuality scholars whose trajectory owes much to Lionel Cantú Jr's influence in our careers; we also feel affirmed by the presence and work of Tomás Almaguer, the first sociologist who examined Latino sexuality, when little was said about both the sexual and ethno-racial dimensions.

For us as scholars in the USA, it is important to situate Latinas and Latinos as a racialized group in this country, one that is often simplistically understood through a cultural and ethnic lens, but that experiences discrimination and racism as any other traditionally marginalized group does. Our focus on Latinas/os is intentional—Latinas/os are the largest multiracial minority group in the USA, but the scholarship on Latinas/os and sexuality is not as abundant as scholarship on sexuality and other groups. Some of the scholarship we cite focuses on migration or racialization—Latinas/os include both US-born as well as immigrants; we also address scholarship on migration because migration is often an understudied

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aspect of sexuality. We are aware that we might be inadvertently excluding scholars who have worked their sexuality projects as part of an unpublished MA thesis or dissertation, those who are not part of these mainstream professional circles, or people we might have inadvertently omitted in these multiple genealogies, and we apologize for those unintentional exclusions.

The study of sexuality in sociology is actually relatively new, and for scholars who conduct sexuality research with US Latinas and Latinos—which recently expanded to include *Latinx*—the history is even more recent. For those of us in this specialty research area, our intellectual genealogy has its roots in dynamic and interconnected conversation with different bodies of knowledge such as sociology of sexuality, Latina/o scholarship in sociology, gender and race, in particular, as well as Latina/o sexuality studies across disciplines.

Sociology of sexualities: US Latinas and Latinos

‘Chicano men: A cartography of homosexual identity and behavior’ (first published 1991) by Tomás Almaguer, was a revelation—an academic trailblazer—at the intersection of sociology of sexualities and Latino studies, validating our academic interests as part of an emerging generation of Latina/o sociologists interested in sexuality, gender, and culture. Its contribution—linking the study of racial social location, and the liminal placement of Chicanos (and other Latinos) in the US American imaginary; its multiple dimensions of thinking through desire, including psychoanalytic readings—as well as its challenges (as one of the few non-white sociologists writing on race and sexuality, Almaguer’s work was often reduced to a simplified ‘Latinos cannot identify as gay’ analysis) mapped a starting point. Gender studies in Latina/o sociology contributed to this conversation, most emblematically in the work of Maxine Baca Zinn, Elisa Facio, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, Cecilia Menjívar, and Denise Segura, who provided a focused lens that helped us as sociologists who looked at Latinas/os and sexuality to do so from a critical perspective, and in social and cultural contexts. This echoed late 1980s work of Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa and the emerging perspective of intersectionality—incorporating analyses with gender, race, class, and sexuality.

But the early 1990s marked a historical moment: the HIV/AIDS epidemic confronted researchers with a crisis that propelled us to investigate sexuality, sexual behavior in particular, in Latino communities. The HIV/AIDS crisis became the trigger that forced us to talk to each other, across disciplines, about sexuality: HIV/AIDS research with Latinas/os included professionals trained in psychology, public health, social work, and anthropology. Non-sociologist scholars in these disciplines and fields include: Sonya Grant Arreola, George Ayala, Héctor Carrillo, Carlos Decena, Rafael Díaz, Jennifer Hirsch, Barbara VanOss Marín and Gerardo Marín, Jesús Ramírez-Valles, and Kurt Organista, among others. They looked at the social and cultural determinants of sexual health and Latinos, that is, sexuality and sexual behavior beyond the medicalization and epidemiology-based models. The boom of HIV/AIDS research with Latinos

in the 1990s created bridges in different directions with other disciplines, including sociology, manifesting the relevance and urgency of conducting rigorous sexuality research within these US Latino communities and families. But it would be a little while before sociology would catch up in doing the social and socio-cultural research needed in studying Latinos and HIV.

As an emerging field, Latina and Latino sexuality studies had continued its bridging out outside and within sociology, including the groundbreaking work on queerness and some US Latino cultures, for instance, with Mexican immigrant men who have sex with men by Héctor Carrillo (2018) and his Trayectos Project research team, with Puerto Rican men by Manolo Guzmán (2006), and on migration, sexuality, and racialization by Eithne Luibhéid (Luibhéid and Cantú, 2005) and Karma Chávez (2013). The 'Sin Vergüenza Conference: An Interdisciplinary Conference of Latino/a Sexuality,' organized by Tomás Almaguer at the University of Michigan in April 2000 unveiled for some of us an emerging field, vibrant projects in the making, and those yet to come. Other Latina and Latino scholars who were not trained as sociologists have impacted sociological approaches to study sexuality, including Marysol Asencio (*Sex and Sexuality Among New York's Puerto Rican Youth*, 2002), Carlos Decena (*Tacit Subjects*, 2011), Rafael M Díaz (*Latino Gay Men and HIV*, 1998), Michael Hames-García and Ernesto Javier Martínez (*Gay Latino Studies*, 2011), Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes (*Queer Ricans*, 2009), José Esteban Muñoz (*Disidentifications*, 1999 and *Cruising Utopia*, 2009), Juana María Rodríguez (*Queer Latinidad*, 2003 and *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, 2014), and Horacio Roque-Ramírez. That non-sociologists such as these were thinking of racialization, diaspora, and sexuality together was of no surprise; that they were opening doors to the thinking established by Moraga and Anzaldúa was a significant influence some sociologists are still exploring, making our work sometimes interdisciplinary.

In Sociology, *The Sexuality of Migration: Border Crossings and Mexican Immigrant Men*, was written as a dissertation that Lionel Cantú defended in 1999, later edited by Nancy Naples and Salvador Vidal-Ortiz, and published ten years later, after his untimely death, in 2002 (Cantú et al., 2009). Groundbreaking and informative, Cantú looked at the lives of men who have sex with men within the context of migration and their economic and material realities, as well as gay asylum and gay tourism in Mexico. *Erotic Journeys: Mexican Immigrants and Their Sex Lives* (2005) was a pre- and post- dissertation project Gloria González-López defended in 2000, exposing the sex lives of self-identified heterosexual women and men within contexts of US-Mexico migration and settlement, socioeconomic marginality and gender inequality, challenging stereotypes and demystifying their lives as *desexualized* beings, as traditionally and historically portrayed in the sociology of migration studies. Highly needed and revealing, *Fertile Matters: The Politics of Mexican-Origin Women's Reproduction* (2008) by Elena Gutiérrez examined the reproductive lives of women of Mexican origin, exploring painful stereotypes and controversial social problems. *Respect Yourself, Protect Yourself: Latina Girls and Sexual Identity* (2012) by Lorena García is a refreshing and inspirational book about Latina youth and sexuality, exposing the intricacies of gender, race

and class dynamics in this process. *Oye Loca: From the Mariel Boatlift to Gay Cuban Miami* (2013) by Susana Peña is a beautifully written and sensitive book about the lives of gay men of Cuban origin within the historical complexities involved prior to and after migration, examinations that involve personal stories, government documents as well as cultural texts. And last but not least, Katie Acosta published *Amigas y Amantes: Sexually Nonconforming Latinas Negotiate Family* (2013), an urgently needed publication that finally gives voice to the stories of Latinas who do not conform with sexual expectations with regard to sex and relationships, that is, Latina women who have sex and establish romantic relationships with women.

In the midst of these two prolific decades, *Latina/o Sexualities: Probing Powers, Passions, and Policies* (2010), edited by Marysol Asencio, reunited the multiple and contrasting voices of scholars conducting sexuality research with Latinas and Latinos across disciplines, including some of the aforementioned authors and other senior and highly respected senior scholars, including Tomás Almaguer and historian Ramón Gutiérrez. The above genealogy includes scholars who have authored their work through books; other sociologists who have published on sexuality research with Latina and Latino populations include Jorge Fontdevila, Antonio (Jay) Pastrana, and James Thing—to name a few. All of these intellectual developments have taken place in close conversation with other traditionally marginalized voices in US academic circles, such as African American scholarship examining sexuality and inequality. We offer two examples to substantiate this: the *Race Sex Power 2008* conference, which took place in Chicago in April of that year (and a later version which was held in April 2018 also in Chicago) illustrates these vibrant intellectual engagements of ethno-racial minorities unfolding in a volatile, unpredictable, and complex US society; and *Black Sexualities: Probing Powers, Passions, and Policies* (2010) edited by Juan Battle and Sandra L Barnes, which was part of the same Ford Foundation commissioned research as the *Latina/o Sexualities* edited book.

Looking ahead, it will be important to continue to explore, and expand, on the links between sociology, Latina and Latino Studies, and sexuality studies. The work ahead should be informed by many of the scholars mentioned here, and at the same time, it is crucial that Latina/o sexuality scholarship in sociology moves beyond the not yet solidified canon. By paying attention to the emerging scholarship in sociology of sexualities, our field will continue to thrive, paving the way for a newer era of sociologists studying Latina/o sexualities, potentially pushing further *las fronteras* of our own sociological imagination.

As sociologists, we celebrate the 20th anniversary of *Sexualities* and feel honored to be part of this special issue.

Note

1. An earlier and shorter version of this essay was published in *Notas* (Fall 2014), the newsletter of the Latino/Latina Sociology Section of the American Sociological Association.

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